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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: MEDIA REACTION, FEBRUARY 21-27

¶11. SUMMARY: During the week of February 21-27, the Kazakhstani media continued to speculate about the regional ramifications of Kyrgyzstan's decision to close the Manas airbase, as well as about the future of both the U.S. dollar and the Kazakhstani tenge amidst the continuing global economic crisis. Analytical commentators focused on U.S.-Russia relations and their effect on Kazakhstan, particularly in light of the Kazakhstan's decision to join the CSTO joint rapid reaction force. END SUMMARY.

RUMINATIONS ON A POST-MANAS WORLD

¶12. Speculation continued in the local press about a post-Manas world after the Kyrgyz parliament's February 19 vote to close the base. Independent "Delovaya Nedelya" was harshly critical of the Kyrgyz decision, claiming "it was obvious that he (Bakiyev) sold the base" in return for \$2 billion from Russia. The paper opined that "Americans now have nowhere to go. Tajikistan might be open to them but Dushanbe is susceptible to Russian influence, and a base close to the Afghan border could easily be penetrated by Taliban spies. The U.S. can't count on Uzbek President Karimov's loyalty as he already closed a base, Turkmenistan cannot host a base on its territory due to its policy of neutrality, and Astana will not risk its relations with Russia through any step viewed as a possible betrayal." The paper then asserted that Azerbaijan is the most probable candidate to host a future U.S. base, but outlined a dramatic scenario in which this will ignite a new arms race, increase tensions, lead to renewed war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and force Kazakhstani soldiers to fight against their Azerbaijani "brothers" as a result of the CSTO agreement recently signed in Moscow. "Delovaya Nedelya" placed blame for this "pessimistic" post-Manas scenario explicitly on the shoulders of Kyrgyz parliamentarians

¶13. In less dramatic articles, a second "Delovaya Nedelya" piece and pro-government "Komsomolskaya Pravda" speculated that Tajikistan, motivated by its painful economic situation, was a likely candidate to offer the United States an alternative to Manas, and cited pro-NATO Georgia as another possibility. This "Delovaya Nedelya" article argued that Tajikistan has a unique opportunity to seek investments from the United States in exchange for assisting with the operation in Afghanistan, but noted that pressure from Russia was to be expected.

"ARMAGEDDON" IS COMING

¶4. Talk of a new "world currency" suggested by President Nazarbayev in January has faded somewhat, with local media reporting instead on the challenges facing the U.S. dollar. The Kazakhstani government also continued to refute rumors that the Kazakhstani tenge will be devalued a second time. Pro-government "Liter" cited increased trade conducted in local currencies around the world as "a sign of the forthcoming Armageddon of the American dollar" and asserted that the "myth" that U.S. bonds are the most reliable is now being laid bare. The article also argued that the fall of the dollar would be a blow to developing economies, and opined that "the American government continues issuing unsecured dollars to increase liquidity, in order to come out of the crisis at the expense of others."

AMERICA ISOLATING RUSSIA?

¶5. Pro-government Argumenty I Fakti cited negative U.S. actions as an explanation for why President Nazarbayev's decision to join the CSTO rapid reaction force on February 4 was "timely and pragmatic." The article charged that the United States has sought, somewhat successfully, to isolate Russia via a "cordon sanitaire" from the Baltics to Georgia and to build a negative view of Russia in Kazakhstan via "American 'public centers.'" The Director of the Kazakh Institute of Strategic Studies, Bulat Sultanov, stated that Kazakhstan, surrounded by economically backward countries and possessing a small army, stood to gain from the support offered by the regional rapid reaction force.

TO NOMINATE, OR NOT TO NOMINATE?

¶6. The opposition-oriented news website www.zonakz.net reported that a Chechen organization called "Children of Kazakhstan" is collecting signatures to nominate President Nazarbayev for the Nobel

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Peace Prize "for his humanity toward the peoples deported during Stalin's regime." However, the following day, the opposition "Taszhargan" newspaper reported that a cultural center is not, according to Nobel rules, eligible to nominate candidates. The jury is therefore still out on the nomination.

HOAGLAND